



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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It is not easy to forget, yet it's not easy to remember either. It's a very painful task for me, but it must be remembered so it will never be repeated. O, dear God, I hope it will not!

I was born in Radom, Poland, in 1920. My childhood was good, I had a loving family. I don't remember too much of my childhood years, somehow there is a dense cloud, like a blanket covering the past.

Some things stand out in my memory:

The dollhouse my father made for me. I think this was my proudest possession. It had windows and carpets, and doll furniture.

The walks with father on Friday nights. He used to hold on to me on one side, and my sister Mania on the other, with our eyes closed, and walk for blocks, guessing where we were. I don't remember father raising his voice. I have never met anybody as good as he was. He was so gentle.

Mother was more of a disciplinarian. O, but the love she gave us! She was so proud of the three of us. I was the eldest, then my sister and our little brother, Jacob. I used to tease him because his eyes were as black as coal, and I used to tell him they were dirty. He would try and wash them. O, how I prayed and hoped after the war to see him again.

We were very good in school, always on top of the class. I don't remember ever having anything below an A. I was very good in art, and I used to love to draw pictures of horses. I don't know why, but I remember always drawing horses.

The unrest, as I remember, came about a couple of years before the war. There were rumors about the horrible treatment of Jews in Germany, the horror of Hitler, but people did not believe it.

Jewish German refugees started coming in to Poland. There was a drive in the Jewish communities to help them.

Poland was preparing for war.

I still have to laugh when I think about the bags of sand and pails of water on the roofs. When a bomb would hit the building we were supposed to go on top and smother it with sand and water. The air force was ready. (The few planes they had did not even have a chance to get off the ground.)

Then came September 1, 1939. Within two days the Germans were in Radom. The bombs were falling all over the city. In the back of our building was a long garden, like a park. In there the tenants of the building prepared an underground shelter, and we all ran to it. Many people were killed that very first day. I remember an old Jew talking to my father that evening. He said that those killed that day were the very lucky ones. They were the chosen ones. I thought he was crazy, but how right he was! The next morning father got a horse and buggy somewhere, and we left the city, thinking that on a farm we will be safer.

So, instead of throwing bombs, the planes flew real low, spraying people with bullets from machine guns, on the roads, in the fields, wherever they could see someone. By the time we got home the next day (still all of us) the German S.S. was all over the city.

The first order was that all Jews must wear arm bands with the Jewish star on it. The tortures were designed to be very systematic.

We used to live in a very nice part of town. The S.S. headquarters were in the next building. I remember father looking out

the window every morning after awakening to see if the German flags were still flying there. Everybody was so sure that the English and American army, airforce, everything will come in any minute and it will be all over.

On December 3 they threw us out of our house. No warning, nothing. Jews one-half hour. Non-Jews, 12 hours. I remember taking with me a plant. It was my favorite plant, and that was all I was holding. After that mother was not the same. This was the house all the children were born in. She was very attached to it. Friends of my parents took us in.

Everything that was Jewish was taken away. Jewish businesses, schools, everything. All Jews were forced to work wherever they sent them. No pay. You were lucky to come home.

Mother was sick and needed medication. A Jewish doctor, a friend gave her a prescription, with a star of David on it (which was a must). The only pharmacy open was taken over by the Germans. I took off my armband and without telling anybody went to the drug store and gave the prescription to a woman behind the counter. I knew I was risking my life. She looked at me for a moment, hesitated, then handed me the medication. I think she was surprised by my guts.

Soon we had to move again. There was really nothing to move, just our tired bodies. The Jews were forced in to a few blocks, a closed ghetto. No food, no means of support. Hunger and death all around. Mothers and children lying in the streets, half-naked, ribs sticking out, eyes popping out. You would think that the angel of death could be more merciful.

We had very nice Polish neighbors before the war. They somehow got me a pass to get out of the ghetto to come to work for them. The women used to give me food to take home. I was risking my life, for if they would catch me bringing food in it was instant death, but it was better than seeing your loved ones dying from hunger.

Then came the night of "liquidation". How can I describe this night? The Germans took all Jews out into a big open space and started selecting into two groups. A smaller one, with still young and healthy bodies, which was sent back to a smaller ghetto, and the rest was sent to Treblinka, to the gas chambers. Mother and my brother Jacob was with them. Father, my sister and I were left. The pain will always be with me. Part of me died then. Whatever happened to me afterward happened to only a part of me. The soul was gone. I was so brave to do so many "heroic" things, yet I was not brave enough to take my own life.

My sister was taken to work to Wsola, I to a different shop, and father to some other place, also. At one time I remember the guard who was supposed to take us to work (we had to be escorted by police) had a fight with the police man at the gate of the ghetto, so he would not let us out. The formen at work called the S.S. and complained that people did not show at work. The S.S. came, took us all out into the street, and made us stand in a row. I was standing next to my friend. All of a sudden she made me change places with her. She insisted. After having us standing there for a long time, wondering what will happen, they started counting and taking every tenth person out (we were 100)

and shooting them. Just to make it more interesting for them, they waited about 10 or 15 minutes before the next victim. My girlfriend was the tenth. I was ninth. Most of the victims lost their mind before they were shot. The scene was so terrible, I can't describe it. I was frozen, I did not feel pain, I did not feel anything.

Afterward I was working in the same place my sister was. We were working in fields, for the vermachht (army). I must say that this was probably the best place to be during that time. The Germans in the army were not in the S.S. party. At least some of them were nice and pretty concerned for us. But good things did not last long, and we were shipped to Pionki. This was an ammunition factory, near Radom. I am not sure, it must have been the end of 1942. The foreman at each section of the factory were Poles, the heads, naturally, were Germans. A Jewish man, Nachman Kaplan, was the Jewish leader.

Each group of workers was led to and from work by German Poles (Germans living in Poland). They were the worst kind. One section only, closed in for living quarters, for us. Each group was assigned to a different part of the factory. I worked in the construction. My main job was "building ditches", digging, that is. Somehow, I was given always the hardest jobs. I must have been an expert.

In the meantime my father was transferred to Pionki, so I could see him every day. My sister was with me. Although the work was hard, not too much to eat, we were hoping the three of us will survive. There was a possibility of escaping, and a few

did, but most of them were caught, brought back and hung. Oh, those hangings! We all had to stay around and watch. We were forced to watch it. It was very hard to hide after escaping. Polish people were given a kilogram of sugar for turning in a Jew, and many, many Poles, all over Poland, did it. Even now, after so many years I can still see their faces. If I would be there alone, maybe I could have taken a chance and escaped, but we would not separate. I looked more Polish than my sister or father, though.

There were rumors going around at that time that people from the underground had contact with the camp and some leaders, which were proven true after the war. We were getting bits of information about what is going on in the outside. We knew that the Russian army is closing in. I don't remember how long I was in Pionki, it must have been close to one year. I was very thin by then. I must have weighed about 85 pounds. With my light skin and bones, I looked like a child.

I realize now how hard it must have been on my father seeing what was happening to us and not being able to do anything about it. My sister had a good job then. She took German in school, so she was needed to help in the office. I took French, which was a big "help" in digging ditches!

But this, too, came to an end and one day we were loaded in cattle cars, on a long train, and shipped out. At first we did not know, but soon enough the destination was visible. Auschwitz. Father hugged and kissed us so hard! We knew we would not see each other again. Everything in me was breaking in little pieces. My heart, my soul, my brain, how can I describe the mental pain,

the agony. Everything in me was dead, but my feet were moving, my eyes were seeing.

An orchestra met us at the gates. Men separate, women separate. They shaved our heads, and took us to a bath house. At that point we didn't know if it was water that will come down or gas. It was water. Afterward we were given dresses. No underwear, just a dress. A short girl got a long dress, a tall girl a short dress. The part we were in with my sister was "Birkenau". The funniest thing was that there were not any living things around. No trees, no birds, no flies, nothing, just us and the smoking chimneys of the crematoriums, the burning of bodies, day and night.

On the first day we were tatooed^{ed}. This was performed by Polish girls who were also prisoners. My dear grandchildren: some day you will find out that grandma did not tell the truth. This was not a telephone number written on my left arm. --

After two or three days the Germans in charge (we were all lined up outside) selected a part to be sent out of Auschwitz to some other place to work. My sister was among them, and I was left behind. At that point I completely fell apart. It was more than I could take, even physically. I did not want to live. I did not eat or drink. My friends were forcing food into me by holding my hands and closing my nose. This went on a couple of days, until I started functioning my myself. Every morning at five we had to stay outside for two or three hours, just motionless. We were being counted and recounted. Food - soup - was given once a day. One container for five girls. No other dishes. Five had to eat out of one container. The Nazis were masters of torture.

Auschwitz A-15089

It is amazing how masses and masses of people will follow one maniac! We were led to a latrine which was one big barack with a row of holes, all together, and by a whistle had to sit down and the next whistle stand up, made no difference if you were ready or not.

At one time I became very ill with a sore throat, and a high fever. I was afraid to let it be known, it meant the oven. At the morning countdown I could not stand very straight, I was dizzy from the fever, so I was beaten and had my face slapped. Would you believe that with no rest, very little food, one cup of dirty water which they called coffee I survived? At home I would have been taken to the doctor at least two times, be in bed for twice as long, with good food and plenty to drink, and much love. Every day we went to work, which consisted of moving one big pile of stones from one place to another, and then moving it back to the first place.

At night the noises of removing people, every night at different barracks, and taking them to the gas chambers. Our only hope was that the war will end before our time will come. Everyday was an eternity, every night a nightmare.

By this time I lost more weight and looked like a little girl of 10. There was not even a sign of ever having a bust, and being young, no sagging skin. My monthly period was gone for a long time before from being undernourished. Still, I was hanging on. The will to live is so strong in a person!

I was in that death camp about three or four months. I did not count the days, every day was exactly alike. Until one day,

everybody was out and the Germans in charge started selecting a group of girls which looked healthier, presumably for work. I was not chosen, but somehow I ran across to the other side and was not noticed. We were taken to a bath house, again not knowing what the shower will bring, but it was water and they gave us clean clothing. Unpredictable as they were, we each received a large piece of bread and a big slice of salami. Next into a train. It was a long train, with lots of box cars. When we left the gates of Auschwitz I started believing that maybe I will live. I started believing in miracles. The train ride took a long, long time. Auschwitz is in Poland, and we wound up in the northern part of Germany, not far from Hanover. It was a munition factory. This was a pretty good place to work in. The foremen were old Germans, too old for the army. They also had French prisoners of war working there. At least here we were treated as human beings. The food rations were also humane..

After four weeks or so (it was decided this was too good for us) we were told we are being moved to a vacation spot. Different things came to our minds. Maybe it's the end, most likely another of their crematoriums, or maybe the Red Cross is rescuing us? Maybe, just maybe, the world outside decided to help us?

After a long journey again we wound up in Bergen-Belsen, the vacation spa. I think we were the first prisoners there. We "lived" in tents, on straw. But we did nothing, no countdowns, no work, nothing. We had wired high fences around and towers with German guards watching day and night. One girl comes to my mind often from this period. She was from Lodz, Poland, and had the

most beautiful voice I ever heard. She sang for hours everyday. The song I loved best was the "Indian Love Call". Every time I hear that song tears come to my eyes. She was killed shortly after.

I don't remember how long we were there, maybe two weeks or so. Then one day a civilian man came, (it turned out he was the head of a munition factory) and picked us out for work. We were experts! This factory was very large, all concealed in a forest. This place was near Elsing. Germany was in bad shape by then. All able bodies were in service. It's a very sad state of affairs when a country has to rely on forced labor, half-starved girls to produce their hand-granades. This is what was produced there. This was my last labor camp and the longest. Every morning about five o'clock, counting outside, counting at the gate going out, counting at the gates going into the plant, and again the same thing on returning. The distance between the barracks and the factory was about two or three miles. We walked to and from work escorted by nazis with rifles ready to be used at any time.

The winter was the worst. We had only wooden shoes like you see on pictures of girls in Holland, bare feet and only a rag on our backs. Snow used to pile up under the shoes, sticking to the wood. You could not stop to scrape it off. What amazes me most is that, not even once, since Auschwitz did I ever get a cold, not even a runny nose. Even germs could not have enough to live on. I was almost naked and barefoot all the time, walking so far every day in freezing weather, rain and snow, and very little food. The rations were given us after returning from work. Some girls used

to save part of the piece of bread for the next day. I used to eat it up at once, so it was easier for me to fall asleep. The next day was the same, day after day. I think I fasted enough then for all of my Yom Kippurs, my childrens', and my grandchildrens'.

We probably would not have to starve so, if the food received for us would have been given us. But there was a staff of Nazis, men and women, in the camp having a good time and partying every night and using our rations of flour, potatoes, sugar, whatever was supposedly sent for us. Some of our girls worked in the kitchen and we knew what was going on. But who do you complain to? The girls in the kitchen could help themselves. The rest of us were starving. Oh, I would be so grateful for a few potatoe peels! I remember once, my aunt was with me at that time. In the evening she came running to me with a pot of soup, thick soup. It happened she was asked by the Germans to scrub their floors, and was given the soup for it. She told me "eat half and leave the rest for me until I will be finished working". I was afraid to eat it, thinking it would be better to wait for her to eat so she would not think I ate more than half. So, I put the pot with the soup next to my head, holding on to it, on my cot. But I was very tired and fell asleep. Next thing I knew was my aunt waking me up and shouting "Didn't you leave me any soup?" The soup was stolen from under my head. I found out later who did it. There was a woman with two daughters among us and she took it. At the time I was very angry, to put it mildly. But later I forgave her. I am sure now that if I would be in her place I would steal for my child, too.

There was a lot of stealing of bread going on, at one time. Taking someone's bread then was taking someone's life. We found out who was doing it. Every barrack had one girl in charge. When this girl found out who was stealing the bread, she made her stand up on a stool, and shamed her in front of all of us, showing us who the "ganif" (thief) is. This woman was about 30 years old, from Warsaw. She came down from the stool and went out and threw herself on the wire fence. The fences around us were electric. She died instantly. After the war her husband, who survived, accused the girl responsible of murder. It's a toss up, in my opinion, who was right.

During that period we had many bombing alarms. Planes, American, English and Russian, used to fly low, showering the areas with leaflets, telling us to hold on, it won't be long. The world outside knew who we were, where we were. But no help from anybody. Where was God? Justice? At work we tried to spoil as many hand-granades as we could. Perhaps we saved somebody's life? I like to think so. The work was hard. The powder tinted our hair and our hands red.

From our camp we could see far away a train passing by every day just before dark. To me this train was a symbol of freedom. How I used to follow that train with my eyes, with my soul! I guess in order to survive, during working time I functioned like a robot, without thinking, but after work, lying on my cot, I was in a different world, day dreaming, pretending I was home again, warm and comfortable, with my family.

We worked one week day shift, the next week night shift. We never met the people from the other shift, but we did find once in

a while Russian notes on the walls by the machines. They must have been Russian prisoners. One night I remember seeing my father in my dream. His eyes were full of tears and closing slowly. In the morning I told my co-workers that my father died. I made sure of the date: it was January 3, 1945. After the war I learned from a survivor who was with father that the date was correct. It was the day my father was killed, in Mathousen, Austria. I also saw my mother in my dreams, telling me not to be afraid, she is watching over me.

This labor camp had an underground shelter, very long. One day they made all of us (800) go in, pack ourselves in, to figure out (we learned later) if this method of disposing of us would be practical. By blocking the entrance we would have no way of getting out. This was only a false alarm. They probably did not like the idea because they did not use it. Whatever we could find we threw in that shelter. The cleaning brigade stole a shovel, sticks, whatever we thought could help us to get out of that shelter. The girls who worked in the camp kitchen or cleaning had it much better than the rest of us. They were close to the kitchen and able to help themselves, but the rest working in the factory were starving. It is not only the weakness, but the hunger pains are unbearable. Toward the end I already started swelling up. It's funny, as long as the heart beats there is still hope.

We had no way of knowing what is going on on the outside, but in the camp we could feel a certain uneasiness. One day I remember, toward the end, the Nazis were burning stacks of papers

outside, burning the evidence. The Allied forces were all around us, we could feel it. The next day we were walked to the train tracks, where a train with a row of box cars was waiting. This train took us to a huge station, with lots of side tracks, and that is where we stopped. The name of this station was Torgau, about 40 kilometers from Berlin. The cars in this train had only one little window on top. We were packed like sardines. It was so hot! And no food, no water. Every day there were dead bodies taken out. We were in this train five days. My aunt was with me. She got a hold of a big turnip before we left, and this turnip we shared five days.

It was the twentieth of April (we found out later), in the morning, and one girl said, "God, let the planes come and finish us." As if God heard her, the very same moment the bombs hit our train. There were so many trains parked on this station, gasoline cars, all kinds of war supplies, but the first bombs struck us. All I remember was dense smoke, panic, girls pushing toward the little window. I am short, and couldn't reach up, and then nothing. I blacked out. The next thing I knew I was running in the woods, which were near the tracks, holding onto my Dad's hand. After a while I realized I was alone, no Dad. I will never know how I got out of there. There were 800 of us in that train. Two hundred survived.

After a while I found four other girls, also wandering in the woods. One of the girls was wounded, and her head was bleeding. The night came, it was cold and raining. We were barefoot, half-naked. We knew we must take care of the bleeding. In the morning

we tried to follow paths until we came to a little town. We looked for a sign of a doctor, a hospital was too dangerous. We found a doctor. He took care of the wounded head, told us not to be afraid, he will not report us. On the way out of his house, we saw cages of rabbits in his yard. We took a few carrots from them, we were so hungry. Back to the woods. There was nothing to pick, no berries, nothing. Again a cold day and night wandering.

The next morning we noticed an old woman pushing a cart with a sack in it. We ran to the path, and asked the woman for some food. I will never forget her: she made a cross over herself with her hand, and ran away. She was probably not sure if she came across five people from another space, or maybe was afraid we will harm her. In the little town we noticed signs that were looking for women with red hair, escaped prisoners, criminals. The only crime we committed was being Jewish, but I guess the little people in the little town believed what they read.

Anyway, we had a sack of potatoes! I don't remember how we started a fire, but we did and we roasted the potatoes. Never had anything in the world tasted as good as those potatoes! For the first time in five years, I could eat as much as I wanted! The potatoes were dirty, we had no water, no salt, but who cared? Cut stomachs were full for the first time. And the taste of freedom with no fences, no guards, no guns pointed at us. Two or three days later, I don't remember exactly, we were very hungry again, very cold and very tired. We had to do something. We wandered in to another little town. This time we looked up the birger-

maister (mayor of the town). We were hoping he will be afraid to turn us in because the allied forces were all around already. We could hear the sounds of fire from different directions. Well, we were right, he did not turn us in, but he was also afraid to keep us, or give us shelter. He was afraid to turn us in just in case we will live, we would testify against him, but he was also still afraid of the Nazis. He gave us bread and each a babushka for our heads, and showed us where to go, which direction, toward the coming allied forces. So, we started out again.

About half a mile or so we noticed men working in a field. They stopped us and started talking in French. It turned out they were French prisoners of war, working on a big estate, belonging to a German baron (nobleman). They asked us to wait and talk to him, perhaps he would let us stay there. We told him that we were Polish, and our camp was bombed. We were afraid to tell him we were Jewish. He was very nice, took us in, and his sister prepared a bath for us, gave us clean underwear and clothing, and gave us food. I remember she served bread, butter and eggs. I did not see an egg in over five years. I forgot how it tasted!

We were sitting and eating and at that time we heard a conversation in the next room. It turned out the birgermaister (our friend) already found out where we were and did not waste any time. He came to warn the baron about the risk he is taking, that we are Jewish and wanted. We heard the conversation and our insides were turning. But the owner of the estate answered him that he is willing to take responsibility. When the birgermaister left, he came in and said he does not care that we are Jewish, and because we were Jewish we deserve even more to be helped. I was not sure for a

while if I am really hearing what I am hearing, or am I dreaming it, or maybe it's another trap. But we were given food and shelter. We were in the basement, hidden, as the owner did not want us to be seen on the outside. There was lots of straw in the basement. I remember we were weaving baskets and all sorts of things just to be occupied with something.

This lasted about four days. One morning the owner came down to see us. He said he and his sister are fleeing toward the on-coming American army, the Russians should be here next morning. (The Germans were terribly afraid of the Russians.) There was no need for us to run, we did not fear the Russians. He also explained that the front will be moving above us and showed us the safest corner in the basement to be in. He also told us to help ourselves to whatever we want afterward, but the Russians did a good job of that. In the late afternoon the German soldiers were all around us, above us, in the house, all over. They set up machine artillery, machine rifles right by the little basement windows. They did not know about us.

I can't describe what was going on a whole night long. The noise from those machines and from incoming Russian "Katiushas" was unreal! The house was shaking and we more so in the basement corner. This was the longest night in my life.

We could tell the difference between the noises of the German rifles and the Russian rifles. The clearer the Russians, the sooner the freedom. I recall something very typical of the Germans. That late afternoon we saw some of the German soldiers shaving outside by the windows. They were on their last leg, surrounded by enemy

all around, but shave they did. Must obey orders!

When the sun came out the Russians stormed in. We were free!
FREE!

The first thing they did is break in the basement wall, and all of a sudden the entrance to a huge underground tunnel with champagne and all kinds of drinks, stored in there. How they knew about it I don't know, but they did and did not waste any time getting it out, loading trucks and trucks. All I took from this house was a clean pair of underwear and a pair of scissors. Why scissors, I will never understand, but that is what I took, and armed with that pair of scissors I started wandering around Germany, Poland, Austria, looking for family.

Traveling was not easy in those days. Germany was in ruins. Berlin was a sight. Nothing but ruins and dead bodies, all over. You could not walk without stepping over dead bodies. No trains. The only means of transportation was army trucks. American, English, Russian, and they were helpful. The Russians had a taste of the Germans on their soil, so they took revenge. Did they ever! The American soldier was only a soldier fighting an enemy soldier. There is a difference.

There was no problem in obtaining food, the occupying forces were very helpful. But, I was so alone. All alone in a world of ruins, strange people, not knowing where to go, where to turn, what to do. During my months of traveling, searching, I came across people from my area, people from Radom, always asking one another: have you seen? have you heard of? Finally I heard my sister was alive. Back to Germany looking all over for months. I

found her in Bad-Nauhaim. At first she did not recognize me. It was a strange meeting, but so happy. I am no longer alone. I have my sister. The two of us started a Jewish community in Bad-Nauhaim.

Mania got married and left for the States. In October of 1946 I got married and together we came to the States, too. Together we started to build a new life. There were not even ashes to sift through, nothing. It was not easy, but slowly, brick by brick, in a strange world, among strangers, a new beginning. In 1950 came the first child, in 1952 the second. A boy for my father, a girl for my mother. I tried hard to bury the scars of war so they would not interfere in raising them. The children were my reward, the grandchildren a very precious gift.

If my life, my being here brought a little happiness, made someone's life a little better, then maybe it was not all in vain. Time is a healer. I had many happy years, met many wonderful people, enjoyed the freedom like no other place in the world has. Too bad it's being abused by so many. All I want now is to see my children happy and peace all over the world.

Rella Tenenbaum Wizenberg

born May 18, 1920

(Chupka)

